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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001984

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS
NSC FOR DORMANDY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/13/2014

TAGS: [PGOV PHUM KIRF ASEC CE IN](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: INDIAN CONCERT MARRED BY GRENADE
ATTACK AND RIOTS LED BY EXTREMIST BUDDHISTS

REF: A. COLOMBO 1952

[B](#). COLOMBO 1805

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: A December 11 concert featuring film and music superstars from India was marred by a grenade attack that killed two people and left a dozen injured, although the perpetrators have not been identified. Buddhist extremists staged riots earlier in the day to protest the show, which coincided with the one-year death anniversary of a well-known right wing monk. The Jathika Hela Urumaya party, which had earlier called for the show to be postponed, denied organizing the day's protests and condemned the violence. The government, while deploring the violence, took the opportunity to blame the opposition United National Party for organizing the protests and attack. While the various political parties engage in mutual finger-pointing, the Sri Lanka leadership has not yet assessed the serious damage the weekend violence has wrought to the island's fading reputation as a bastion of religious tolerance -- or to its tourism industry. End Summary.

Violence at Indian megastars show

[1](#)2. (C) In the concluding moments of a December 11 show at the Colombo race course featuring the biggest film and music stars from India entertaining over 30,000 fans, a hand grenade exploded near the stage, killing two people and injuring a dozen others, some critically. The incident followed violent riots earlier in the day and a week-long attempt by the Buddhist extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party to get the show canceled or postponed. Led by its monk MPs, JHU members protested in front of the Indian High Commission in Colombo on December 7 and harangued the Government of Sri Lanka to reschedule the show because it coincided with the December 12 one-year death anniversary of Soma Thero, a Buddhist cleric known for his extremist hard-line views (see Ref A).

Afternoon protests

[1](#)3. (C) Responding to rallying calls from the JHU and from other groups, including a Soma Thero memorial committee, youth from various parts of Sri Lanka began to converge on Colombo during the day on December 11. One group of monks -- not members of the JHU -- on the morning of December 11 declared fast-unto-death unless the show was cancelled. According to JHU Deputy Leader Venerable Omalpe Sobitha Thero, MP, JHU monks met with the group of fasting monks and the show's organizers around 3:30 pm on December 11 and worked out a compromise. The monks would end their fast and the organizers would apologize for holding the concert on Soma Thero's death anniversary and observe a moment of silence at the start of the show that evening. Speaking to poloff on December 13, Sobitha Thero added that several groups of youth -- "extremists" according to him -- had wanted to continue to protest, but he and his fellow JHU monks had urged them to stop, telling them the organizers had already apologized.

[1](#)4. (C) As the crowd's frenzy built and some JHU members trying to quell the disturbance, the situation turned violent with stones thrown at buildings and cars attacked. Police moved to disperse the rioters, using water cannons and tear gas. The police arrested 12 people, but ultimately released them -- without charges -- when some monks began protesting the arrests in front of the police station. Embassy officials caught up in the scene (none were attacked or injured -- the demonstration was in a neighborhood where a number of Embassy residences are located) commented that the riot appeared to have been carefully orchestrated, with many of the participants having arrived on buses from out of town.

[1](#)5. (C) Sobitha Thero told poloff that the JHU publicly condemned the riots and the later grenade attack and has expressed its regrets to the families of those injured, as well as to the Indian government, and the concert organizers and stars. He denied that the JHU was in any way involved with -- or responsible for -- the violence, blaming the

"extremist groups" for planning it all. Sobitha Thero added the JHU would call on the government to cease blaming his party and conduct a full investigation into the attack.

Grenade at the show

16. (C) Despite the riots that shocked many and heavy rain earlier in the afternoon, over 30,000 people attended the "megastars" concert. According to some sources, approximately 5,000 fans were Indians from Mumbai and Chennai who came specifically to see their hometown pop icons. Towards the end of the show, police and contacts say a grenade exploded near the stage. Two Sri Lankans were killed immediately and several others taken to the hospital, including one of the show's organizers. Some victims remain in critical condition. The police have not made any arrests in connection with the attack, although their investigations are ongoing. (Note: There is no evidence -- or suspicion -- that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were involved in the violence.)

17. (C) Many staff from the Indian High Commission -- including the High Commissioner -- were in attendance, but none were injured. In a December 13 phone conversation with DCM, Indian Deputy HC Mohan Kumar, who had been sitting in the VIP section near the stage, said there was "no question" that the grenade had been thrown from within the crowd and was "probably intended for the stage." Kumar further commented that security had been thorough at the beginning of the evening but became noticeably more lax as the evening progressed.

Government: the political response

18. (C) While the government was quick to condemn the violence on December 11, President Kumaratunga was even quicker to point the finger of blame at the opposition United National Party (UNP). In press accounts of a speech the President delivered on December 12, she accused the UNP of trying to create a climate of terror in the South. According to contacts, three of the protestors arrested during afternoon riots on December 11 were UNP supporters from the Colombo suburb of Kotte. Contacts theorized that the UNP association may have led the government to blame the UNP, specifically Ravi Karunanayake, an UNP MP from Kotte who has publicly spoken against the President on many occasions. (Note: As mentioned above, youth from around the island answered the JHU's call to protest the Indian show. Most contacts think it was only coincidence that three from Kotte were arrested and not indicative of any connection with Karunanayake.)

19. (C) The President may feel obligated to the JHU for its votes in support of the budget, which passed on December 10 with all nine JHU MPs in favor. She may also be counting on those nine votes for support to oust the Speaker -- currently a UNP MP -- once Parliament resumes sitting in January 2005. Interlocutors say that the President needs a government-friendly MP in the Speaker position to convene the constituent assembly she is seeking with which to change the Constitution.

Repercussions

10. (C) A variety of interlocutors have commented that the December 11 violence damaged Sri Lanka's reputation on the world stage. Several, including Kumar, noted that tourism from India -- currently the second largest source country for tourists to Sri Lanka -- will surely suffer. Organizers of other large concert productions, which provide revenue for Sri Lanka and draw visitors from neighboring countries, will also potentially reconsider touring Sri Lanka. (Note: Air Supply, performing for the first time ever in Sri Lanka, gave a moderately attended, protest- and violence-free concert the previous evening of December 10.)

Comment

11. (C) The JHU, a small party that is disintegrating under its own internal pressures (Ref B) is obviously clutching at issues -- however inconsequential -- that it believes will maintain its relevance to the conservative electorate that forms its base. Unfortunately, religious fanaticism, especially when stoked by out-of-town rent-a-crowds, is a difficult sentiment to control. While the potential injuries from the grenade and riots were thankfully limited, the effects of the December 11 violence will long linger for Sri Lanka. Few people believe the President's assertion that the UNP was involved and clearly hold the JHU and other extremists Buddhists responsible for fomenting the atmosphere which led to the violence. The JHU's public denial of responsibility in the incidents is unconvincing to many observers in both the government and the Opposition, who view

the weekend tragedy as further evidence of the party's naivete and inexperience. Unfortunately, the violence was in some way a fitting commemoration of Soma Thero, whom many believe incited the rash of attacks against Christian churches that climaxed with his death in December 2003. End Comment.

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